The Fourth Church Pulpit

A HEALING HAND EXTENDED

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Sunset Blessing

Scripture
2 Corinthians 5:16-21 Mark 1:21-31

"He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." Mark 1:31 (NRSV)

#1

Viktor Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist who was arrested and imprisoned by the Nazis. He was sent to Auschwitz and what he learned about the amazing human ability to survive even the worst degradation, humiliation and physical torture informed his work and his writing after the war. In one of his books, *Man's Search for Meaning,* he remembers when he and a group of prisoners were being herded out of the camp at night time:

> "We stumbled on in the darkness, over big stones, and through large puddles ... The accompanying guards kept shouting at us and driving us with the butts of their rifles. Hiding his mouth behind his upturned collar, the man marching next to me whispered suddenly, 'If our wives could see us now!' And as we stumbled on for miles, slipping on icy spots, supporting each other time and time again, nothing was said, but we both knew. Each of us was thinking of his wife. A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth — that love is the ultimate and highest goal to which we can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: the salvation of humanity is through love and in love. I understood how one who has nothing left in the world may know bliss — be it only for a brief moment ..."

The salvation of humanity is through love. Sounds like a romantic abstraction, if it weren't for the fact that the man who said it was, at the moment, being battered by rifle butts carried by SS troopers. Viktor Frankl lived through that moment, and all the ghastly experiences ahead, because of the power — the sheer life sustaining power of the idea — that he was loved.

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And so one day Jesus of Nazareth took an old woman by the hand, lifted her up from her sick bed, looked her in the eye, and she lived.

It's at the beginning of the story, the very first day of his strange career. He is now intentionally representing God's kingdom in what he says and does. He has recruited several followers: Simon and Andrew, James and John, and together they have walked to the village, where the four men and their families live, Capernaum. On the sabbath they do what Jewish men are supposed to do — they go to the tiny synagogue in the village, and there they encounter a man with an unclean spirit, a demon.

His age believed that evil spirits were everywhere: in the air, in the desert. All sorts of sickness was attributed to evil spirits. Particularly what we would call mental illness, accompanied by behavior that frightened and threatened people, was believed to be the result of demon possession. It's an important theme in the story of Jesus — his authority over evil spirits. They recognize him. They acknowledge his superior power. He calls them by name and rebukes or exorcises them.

Whatever is going on here, the writer of the New Testament wants us to know that this man was unique, that he not only spoke with authority, even the evil spirits acknowledged him and obeyed him.

It was a very dramatic incident in that little synagogue. But I truly love what happens next. They walk from the synagogue back to the house where they were staying for lunch, the house where Simon and Andrew and their families lived together. Simon's mother-in-law is sick in bed with a fever. It's not a large house — she's actually lying on a mat, under a cover of some sort, over in a dark corner ... nobody is paying much attention. They tell Jesus about her. He walks to her dark corner, greets her, takes her by the hand, lifts her up from the mat where she has been lying for days, weeks, looks her squarely in the eye as he holds her there shaking unsteadily. And then, the writer remembers — "the fever left her, and she began to serve them ..." "Cook dinner" is a good translation.

I love the scene because I had a mother-in-law like that. Bertha Kearney could be on her death bed and if her daughter's husband and three friends happened to show up in her kitchen at dinner time — she'd be at the stove, cranking out sloppy joes and baked beans, or beef stew ... presiding at a modern-day miracle of loaves and fishes as assorted containers of leftovers suddenly become something magnificent and bountiful, in the community of her kitchen. One of Garrison Keillor's funniest pieces is about a mother-in-law who resents her son-in-law for capturing her daughter and grandchildren and forcing them to live in California instead of Lake Wobegon. She plans to get him during a holiday homecoming visit by stuffing him with food, like the Thanksgiving turkey. This scene of Simon's mother-in-law, always reminds me of Keillor's stuffed son-in-law, and my own mother-in-law who would do exactly what Simon Peter's mother-in- law did: shake off whatever was bothering her and start cooking.

What's wrong with her, do you suppose? Do you suppose she has a virus, or an infection of some kind? Does Jesus' authority over demons and evil spirits extend to bacteria and viruses? Is it some kind of bio-feedback? A man with the ability to persuade people actually to affect physiological change in their heart rate and temperature?

We can't know that, of course. We can't be sure of any of the diseases described in the New Testament. What we can know is that she was a mother-in-law. And to know that is actually to know a lot. She is someone's mother-in-law. She is no longer someone's wife. She is living in her son-in-law's house. "My mother-in-law is coming to visit," evokes eye-rolling and bad humor. Mother-in-law jokes are standard fare. I knew a woman once who's hair started to fall out in chunks prior to her mother-in-law's annual visit. My barber, who knows who I am, doesn't want to talk about the baseball strike or Michael Jordan — she talks to me about her mother-in-law. (We're making some progress — things are better.) It's not easy being a mother-in-law in any age. If you do too much you're controlling; if you don't offer to help you're distant. If you say a word about the children you're meddling; if you buy gifts you're manipulating ... Being a father-in-law is easy. This woman is part of a culture that doesn't value women very much anyway; a culture in which a woman's function and role are domestic and familial. Men in that culture have privilege and power and dignity which actually accrues with age. Men increase in stature and importance and become wise with age. Men only go to synagogue, discuss politics and religion. Women have babies and cook, and make clothes; and when they are old and widowed ...

This is an elderly woman, a widow, living with her daughter and son-in-law — and his brother, Andrew. This woman, is very simply "excess baggage." [See Lamar Williamson, *Interpretation, Mark*] She has no inherent value, no real function in that household, or that community, for that matter. She takes up valuable space. She's another mouth to feed. And so, my guess, and it's only that, of course, is that she's in bed with more than a fever. She's in bed because there's not much reason not to be. She can't do anything right. She just gets in the way. It's simpler to lie there on the mat, with a fever.

And so when Jesus heals a man in the synagogue and then immediately afterward pays particular and personal attention to an elderly woman, taking her by the hand, gently helping her stand, whatever was making her sick is confronted with a new authority — a powerful new reality — her worth as a person, her value as a human being, her importance. Someone cares. Someone cares enough to see me, notice me, cares enough to ask how I'm feeling today, cares enough to touch me, to lift me up and help me stand. No one had ever done that for her. No one touched her any more. "Then her fever left her, and she began to serve them." The salvation of humanity is through love, Viktor Frankl said. It was for her. #5

Something healing and restorative always happens when people know they matter, that someone cares for and about them. Good doctors know that it is never legitimate to subdivide a person into distinct parts — body, mind, spirit. How one feels mentally or spiritually has a lot to do actually with how one feels physically. "I'm sick with worry" is not merely a rhetorical exaggeration. It is a description of how a mental or spiritual state affects the physical process of digestion. The reverse is true. If you feel good physically — your thinking and your emotions are affected.

The late Norman Cousins and novelist Reynolds Price are two people who have written about their experiences with serious illness and the process of healing. Cousins lamented the fact that the risk of litigation today routinely causes physicians to tell patients the worst possible outcome of their illness and treatment. I know that it is legally

necessary, but it is not exactly comforting, or good for one's confidence, to hear, the night before your surgery the possibilities of not surviving, with clinical precision. Cousins says it's almost like the doctor putting a hex on the patient.

#5 cont.

Reynolds Price, in his wonderful book, *A Whole New Life: An Illness and A Healing,* describes the magnificent care he received at Duke University hospital during his ten-year battle with spinal cancer and writes gratefully about caring, sympathetic physicians and particularly the nurses. His presiding oncologist, however, was cold, distant, never asked how he felt, never smiled, turned away when Price tried casual conversation in the hospital hallway. Price calls him "my frozen oncologist."

He reflects:

> "It's often said by way of excuse that doctors are insufficiently trained for human relations. ... but what I wanted and needed badly, from that man then, was the frank exchange of decent concern. When did such a basic transaction between two mammals require post graduate instruction beyond our mother's breast?" [p. 56]

It's what we can give to one another: basic human concern: sympathy: the healing gift of letting another human being know that he or she matters: that their pain, or sickness or fear matters to us. It's why clergy visit in the hospital: to convey something of the concern of the community, the church, and within that, the healing love of ~~Jesus Christ~~ God

Healing remains a mystery. John Dominic Crossan in his book about Jesus says that there is a difference between curing a disease and healing an illness. Disease is systemic, functional — something is going wrong somewhere in my body. Illness is the socially isolating experience of having a disease, living in pain, not functioning completely or bearing the burden of the community's moral conclusions about illness sometimes. If that can be dealt with — with sympathy, concern, love even, healing happens, even if disease remains. Norman Cousins wrote

> "Not every illness can be overcome ... But ... there is always a margin within which life can be lived with meaning and even with a certain measure of joy, despite illness ..." [*Anatomy Of An Illness*, p. 149]

That's what Jesus did for Simon's mother-in-law, brought her back into the community: told her she mattered and gave her dignity and self-worth and self-esteem: and her fever left and she served them.

One of our Fourth Church physicians gave me an article from a recent medical journal, *Annals of Internal Medicine.* It was written by Dr. Barbara Hasko Curry who was on duty in the emergency room when the mother of a little girl who had been kidnapped checked in. The case was in the newspaper every day, Billings, Montana ..., every parent's worst nightmare. The mother and father were in the media every day pleading for the life of their daughter who had disappeared on her way home on her bicycle one night. She was 10 and her body had just been found.

Dr. Curry picked up the mother's chart. "Unable to sleep" was the presenting complaint. "Doctor, I am not sick. You know that, don't you? I am not sick. My heart is broken."

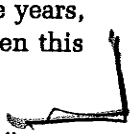
Dr. Curry remembers:

> "I stood in silence before her. I knew there was nothing in my black bag for this woman. All the sophisticated technology and state-of-the-art pharmacotherapeutics at my disposal were for nought in the face of this simple devastation. Totally unequipped by years of training and experience, I could only cry."

Dr. Curry explains that doctors are conditioned not to cry — that if they allowed their feelings to control their behavior there would be more crying than medicine practiced, particularly in the emergency room. But she says —

"there are times when shared emotion between physician and patient is the best, if not the only effective treatment.

"So I cried. We cried. We held each other and cried. She told me about her daughter's fine embroidery, and I told her about my little girl too. And then her husband came in and we all held each other and cried some more. And I knew then how this family would make it ... They would survive by spreading out their tremendous burden of grief to people who, like me, would be willing to share small parts of it, moments at a time, over weeks and months, maybe years, until the burden would become manageable. And I knew for that moment, I had given this patient the treatment that she needed." [*Annals of Internal Medicine*, July, 1993, p. 86]



The classic way to interpret the story of Jesus and Simon's feverish mother-in-law is to see "fever" as a metaphor for what is wrong with us. The ancient church father and theologian, Jerome, wrote in the year 400:

"O that he would come to our house and enter and heal the fever of our sins ... each and every one of us suffers from fever. When I grow angry, I am feverish. So many sins. So many fevers ... Let us ask Jesus to come and touch our hand. [See Williamson, p. 55]

The deepest mystery of our faith is that he does that — comes into our homes — touches our hand — lifts us up. The deepest mystery of our faith is that in his love we are made whole.

"O Lord, my God, I cried to you," the Psalmist wrote.
"I cried to you for help and you healed me.
O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, you restored me to life." [Psalm 30]

What is your fever? What is it that isolates you from the human community, from your family, your loved ones? What is it that causes you to feel alone, standing all by yourself?

Is it physical illness? Is it stress because you are working harder than you ever did and you can't keep up? Is your fever self-imposed? Have you chained yourself to a schedule and pace of life and career path and success formula which is making it impossible to establish, let alone enjoy, life-giving relationships? Is your fever your relationships? Your sexuality? Your obsession? "So many fevers," old Jerome said. *Newsweek* magazine devoted a whole cover article two weeks ago to the new phenomenon of chronic exhaustion, fatigue, stress, breakdown and burnout. I saw a lot of us and the life we live in the lead —

"We're fried by work, frazzled by the lack of time. Technology hasn't made our lives better, just busier. No wonder one quarter of us say we're exhausted."

Or is it the Simon's mother-in-law syndrome? We're either withdrawing to the dark quiet corner — or the exact opposite, we're working ourselves to death — because we're not sure we matter much, not at all sure that our lives are important to anyone.

The deepest mystery of our faith is that there is one who cares: who loves us as if there were only one of us to love: who identifies so thoroughly with us that there is nothing we experience, no pain, no fear, no anxiety that he does not experience with us. The deepest mystery and the best news of our faith is that there is one whose love for us, commitment to us, promise to stay with us, is so complete that he dies our death — dies for us and with us.

The salvation of humanity is in love, the psychiatrist observed. There is a hand of love extended to each of us. You are invited to take it in your own. Hold it tightly. Let the strength of it lift you up.